

## Balzac's voice from the beyond

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## BALZAC'S VOICE FROM THE BEYOND: ADAPTATION AND MEDIUMSHIP IN CHARLES D'ORINO'S *CONTES DE L'AU-DELÀ* (1904)<sup>1</sup>

Since the nineteenth century, numerous writers have resurrected Balzac in fiction. Following the novelist's death in 1850, his widow Éveline sought to complete some of the works that he had left unfinished, enlisting his former secretary Charles Rabou to provide endings for both *Le Député d'Arcis* (1854) and *Les Petits Bourgeois* (1855). As well as these early attempts at filling the textual gaps in *La Comédie humaine*, literary adaptations and re-imaginings of Balzac's work have continued to appear in a variety of different genres and formats. In the early twentieth century, Proust was famously captivated by the challenge of recreating Balzac's narrative style, as evidenced in particular by *L'Affaire Lemoine* (1919), in which he pastiched Balzac and several of his favourite authors including Flaubert and Renan. More recently, in 1997, Patrick Rambaud published *La Bataille*, his continuation of a novel in which Balzac had wanted to depict the Battle of Essling but completed only part of the first sentence. Furthermore, literary rewritings of Balzac's work have extended to erotic novels such as Raoul Vaneigem's *La Vie secrète d'Eugénie Grandet* (1981), which depicted an incestuous relationship between the eponymous heroine, her parents, and the family's servant Nanon.

Within this vibrant corpus of adaptive material, the works of Charles d'Orino, the pseudonym of Jeanne Marie Clotilde Briatte, Comtesse Pillet-Will (1851-1910) (hereafter referred to as Pillet-Will) stand out as particularly fascinating, not least because they invite us to explore the relationship between adaptation and mediumship, and the complex interplay of artistic voices that underpins both practices. Focusing on Pillet-Will's 1904 volume *Contes de l'au-delà: sous la dictée des esprits*, this article argues that spirit writing can help to deepen our understanding of what adaptation is, and how the distinct voices of the adaptor and their source material co-exist in the same work. Having enjoyed brief prominence in the French spiritualist movement during the first decade of the twentieth century, Pillet-Will appears as an intriguing figure through which to analyse the adaptive impulses within mediumship. Between 1904 and 1908, she published six volumes on spiritualist topics, consisting mainly of essays and short fictions which she attributed to the spirits of writers including Balzac, Maupassant, and Dumas père. However, despite their intrinsic interest as works which connect the practices of adaptation and spiritualism, the writings of Pillet-Will have garnered little scholarly attention. Reflecting a charge so often levelled at adaptations, critics have dismissed these spirit texts as second-rate attempts at imitating the authors they claim to represent. As early as 1909, a review in *Gil Blas* complained that the spirits purportedly channelled by Pillet-Will "ont tous le même style, font les mêmes fautes de français, disent des sottises égales et semblables, dès qu'ils passent par le canal de Madame d'Orino" (1909, p. 1). Similarly, in a more recent overview of spirit writing in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Daniel Sangsue identifies the *Contes de l'au-delà* as one of a number of pastiches in this genre which failed to replicate the style of the dead authors that had inspired them. "Comme dans le genre du dialogue des morts, dont le procès-verbal spirite est aussi l'héritier", observes Sangsue of these spirit texts, "l'imitation stylistique n'est souvent pas un souci primordial" (2010, p. 83).

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to record my warmest thanks to Michelle Cheyne, Lisa Downing, Beth Gerwin, Kate Griffiths, and Tim Unwin, all of whom read and commented on drafts of this article at various stages of its development. I also wish to express my gratitude to the anonymous readers of the *Revue Balzac / Balzac Review* for their very constructive suggestions, particularly in helping me to unpick some of the complex gender debates of the Belle Époque.

To judge Pillet-Will's writings merely as poor-quality pastiches is nevertheless to underestimate their complexity as literary artefacts which enable us to rethink the way in which adaptation functions. Containing three stories attributed to the spirit of Balzac, the *Contes de l'au-delà* appear as a compelling framework through which to assess the importance of spirit writing as a form of adaptation, most notably because the figure of the female writer-medium can also be viewed as an adaptor who channels and re-energises the ghostly voices of her literary predecessors. The spirit texts that emerge during this process are — like adaptations — polyphonic works in which different artistic voices compete, intermingle, and become subsumed into each other. In order to unpick this interplay of voices in the work of Pillet-Will, this article argues that the *Contes de l'au-delà* resonate strongly with the Barthesian idea of the death of the author. In his 1968 essay "La mort de l'auteur", Barthes described writing as consisting of multiple voices which cannot be assigned to a single author or point of origin. "L'écriture", he declared, "c'est ce neutre, ce composite, cet oblique où fuit notre sujet" (1984 [1968], p. 63). This theorisation of the multivocality of literary texts helps to explain why Pillet-Will's channelling of Balzac deserves specific attention. As Barthes himself argued in *S/Z* (1970), his study of the short story *Sarrasine*, the Balzacian text is a plural construct founded on the interaction between different codes and discourses. More recently, scholars including Éric Bordas (1997), Nicole Mozet (1990), and Franc Schuerewegen (1990) have shown that Balzac's representation of the world is by no means uniform or consistent, but that it mobilises an array of narrative voices and ideological perspectives which do not always agree with each other. As an artistic practice, spirit writing proves inherently suited to exploring how the polyphonic nature of Balzac's work extends to, and evolves through, the process of adaptation. In a manner reminiscent of the novelist's own literary output, spirit texts appear as multivocal artefacts in which different artistic voices — those of the adaptor, the dead author, and the source material — are represented. As this essay will argue, Pillet-Will's ability to adapt the sometimes contradictory voices in Balzac's work is key both to imitating the novelist's style convincingly and articulating her own spiritualist agenda. The stories that she credits to the deceased author of *La Comédie humaine* illustrate how the polyphony of Balzac's writing operates in this adaptive context, thus making them an invaluable subject for scholarly analysis.

As a starting point for this discussion, I want to begin by situating Pillet-Will within the broader context of French spirit writing, and by examining the key role that the genre played — somewhat problematically — as a medium of expression for female authors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The second part of my essay considers how Pillet-Will adapted the voice of Balzac in order to preach the values of charity and moral progress which underpinned spiritualist thought during this period. The *Contes de l'au-delà* illustrate what Helen Sword has termed the "fertile paradox at the heart of all modern mediumship" (2002, p. 30). On the one hand, Pillet-Will claimed to be the passive transcriber of messages from the spirit world. On the other hand, her texts afford glimpses of the active role she took in their production, and of the beliefs she espoused. As the *Contes de l'au-delà* evoke the spirit of Balzac, they also adapt his authorial voice in an attempt to bolster the French spiritualist movement at a time when it was facing growing hostility from the French scientific community. Finally, I turn to the way in which Pillet-Will can be seen to reflect on both her work as a writer-medium and the nature of spirit writing as an adaptive activity. As this final section of the article will show through its reading of the story "La Possédée", the *Contes de l'au-delà* represent adaptation as a process that is haunted by the dead writers of the past, but that confronts this Bloomian anxiety of influence by using their voices to inspire new creative endeavours.

Comtesse Pillet-Will remains a spectral presence in academic criticism. References to her published works appear only fleetingly in surveys of literary pastiche, and to date

scholars have appeared reluctant to treat them as worthy of serious consideration.<sup>2</sup> The lack of critical interest in Pillet-Will's career is particularly surprising given her extensive activity as a writer-medium during the first decade of the twentieth century. The publication of the *Contes de l'au-delà* in 1904 heralded a period of intense productivity in her career, during which she completed a further five volumes in four years. Her articles and lectures also appeared, albeit more infrequently, in spiritualist periodicals. The majority of her works took the form of automatic writings featuring a catalogue of both anonymous and well-known spirits. Among these other-worldly figures, she showed a predilection for appropriating the voices of canonical nineteenth-century authors — including non-French writers such as Dickens and Pushkin — and eminent priests and theologians such as Lamennais and the more recently deceased Père Didon. Pillet-Will claimed to have developed a close relationship with these departed individuals, and argued that the distinctiveness of their narrative styles proved the authenticity of her contacts with them. “On remarquera que leur style devient plus familière”, she wrote of these spirits in the 1905 preface to her *Échos d'un autre monde*. “Ils reprennent peu à peu les qualités brillantes de leur style terrestre” (1905, p. 1).

However, despite asserting that her communications with the spirit world were genuine, Pillet-Will also used the voices of these earlier writers and religious figures in order to maximise sales of her work and find a place for herself in print. During this period of widespread public and scientific interest in spiritualism, she targeted a highly literate, and predominantly wealthy, readership. Her 1907 collection of theosophical essays, *Nos Invisibles*, for example, appeared in a limited edition of 500 copies and was priced at 100 francs. A smaller run of 20 copies, numbered and printed on fine Japanese paper, commanded 200 francs each. In a further incentive to collectors, both editions contained 33 plates by the Italian watercolourist Raffaele Mainella. This blatantly commercial dimension of Pillet-Will's spiritualist activities irritated some sections of the mainstream press, which accused her of being an unscrupulous charlatan who used her wealth to ensure the widespread circulation of her spiritualist ideas. “Madame d'Orino n'est pas la seule femme qui écrive dans le monde spirite”, read a blistering review in *Gil Blas*. “Mais elle est la seule qui soit dangereuse en donnant une fortune pour véhiculer ses livres” (1909, p. 1). By contrast, in spiritualist circles, her work received a more enthusiastic reception. Upon the publication of the *Contes de l'au-delà*, the *Revue spirite* announced that “ces très curieux récits prouvent l'exactitude de la théorie de l'existence éternelle [et seront] le gros succès de la saison” (1905, p. 5).

The confidence with which this review predicted the success of the *Contes de l'au-delà* was by no means misplaced given the popularity that spirit writing had achieved in France by the end of the nineteenth century. Following the advent of spiritualism in the United States in 1848, the vogue for communicating with the dead quickly spread to Europe, where its adherents were quick to attempt to summon up the spirits of some of the great figures of literary history. As Antoine Faivre (2013) has shown, spirit messages attributed to Balzac began to appear in the *Journal du magnétisme* in 1855, only five years after the novelist's death. After being introduced to spiritualism by Delphine de Girardin during her visit to Jersey in 1853, Victor Hugo also presided over numerous seances during which he claimed to have contacted the spirits of some of his most celebrated artistic predecessors. The transcripts of these sessions, which were not published until after Hugo's death, included a play supposedly dictated by Shakespeare, and poetry attributed to the spirit of André Chénier, the composition of which had been interrupted by Chénier's execution in 1794.<sup>3</sup> Spirit texts

<sup>2</sup> One of the only scholarly discussions of Pillet-Will's work to have appeared to date is the short analysis by Noëlle Benhamou, 2005, which reprints the stories attributed to the spirit of Zola in the *Contes de l'au-delà*.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of Hugo's interest in spiritualism, see for example Mutigny, 1981, and Chambers, 2008. Daniel Sangsue provides a brief and more general overview of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century spirit (see 2010, p. 82-84).

ascribed to Dante, Chateaubriand, Musset, and Voltaire, amongst others, also became a staple feature of the *Revue spirite*, which Allan Kardec, the leader of the French spiritualist movement, founded in 1858. As spirit writing flourished in France during the Second Empire, male mediums nevertheless continued to dominate this practice. In Kardec's vision of the movement, the core principles of spiritualism were logic and rationalism, which he associated primarily with men. Indeed, it was not until the mid-1860s that the figure of the female writer-medium began to assume much greater prominence. That women started to become more active in the spiritualist community around this time owed much, argues Lynn L. Sharp, to the growing liberalisation of Second Empire society, and to the ever-widening debate over female emancipation that this encouraged. Of more immediate relevance to the movement, however, was the emergence of Léon Denis as its key figurehead following the death of Allan Kardec in 1869. "Where Kardec had striven to emphasise the movement's masculine character", explains John Warne Monroe, "Denis feminised it" (2008, p. 228). For Denis, the emotional refinement and sensitivity of women made them perfect conduits for spirit communication, and the ideal counterweight to the scientific rationalism that his predecessor Kardec had favoured.

Denis's association of spiritualism with femininity helps to explain why growing numbers of women embraced the movement during the Belle Époque. Against the backdrop of a Third Republic that viewed them principally as wives and mothers, spiritualism took women seriously, and offered them a voice — albeit one that, as we shall see in relation to Pillet-Will's purported communication with the spirit of Balzac, was never fully their own. For many women who turned to spiritualism during this period, writing functioned as a key instrument of expression. In 1886, Lucie Grange, a Parisian medium working under the name Hab or Habimélah, became the sole editor of the spiritualist review, *La Lumière*. The periodical continued to appear until Grange's death in 1908, by which time she had also published eight books on spiritualist topics. Between 1895 and 1898, Marie-Antoinette Bosc, writing under the initials M. A. B., also published four volumes dealing with traditional spiritualist themes, including a collection of short stories, *Nouvelles ésotériques* (1897), whose protagonists are exposed to lessons about the importance of charitable behaviour and the continuation of life after death. During a period in which society complicated women's attempts at exerting their influence in the literary sphere, spiritualism represented an important creative outlet, functioning for Bosc as "un masque qui lui permet d'écrire et d'être lue". "En ce cas", writes Nicole Edelman, "la médiumnité devient un subterfuge et un déguisement nécessaire pour transgresser les interdits faits aux femmes du dix-neuvième siècle. Elle est une étrange manière d'être au monde, un chemin détourné pour trouver son identité" (1995, p. 215-216).

As was the case for her contemporaries Bosc and Grange, writing enabled Pillet-Will both to penetrate the literary sphere, and to defend her spiritualist beliefs in the face of scientific scepticism. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a boom period for spiritualism in France, during which the expansion of the French empire fuelled the growth of the movement. "Hinduism, occultism, 'exotic' and mystery religions", writes Sharp, "were among the imports of colonialism, renewing popular interest in reincarnation" (2006, p. 167). Spiritualist congresses were held in Paris in 1889 and 1900, the first of these welcoming delegations from more than fifty towns and cities across France. Even the national newspapers, adds Sharp<sup>4</sup>, gave a respectful account of these gatherings. However, as spiritualism began to garner widespread acceptance in the press as a legitimate pursuit, hostility towards the practice was already growing within the French medical community. The precedent for this antipathy had been set by the end of the 1880s, first by the neurologist

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<sup>4</sup> See 2006, p. 164-165.

Jean-Martin Charcot, who associated mediumship with female hysteria, and then by his student Pierre Janet, who argued that attempted communication with the dead was symptomatic of personality disorder.<sup>5</sup> Subsequent psychical research aimed at understanding mediumship commonly resulted in embarrassment for both the researchers themselves and their subjects. In 1905, the physiologist Charles Richet attended a number of seances at a villa in Algiers, where he photographed the materialisation of a spirit named Bien Boa. After trumpeting the authenticity of these events, Richet was forced into a retraction a few months later, when one of the villa's former servants confessed to having played the role of the ancient priest, complete with helmet and fake beard attached with string.<sup>6</sup>

Through her publications, Pillet-Will would continue to refute the charges of fraud and mental instability directed at her peers. A disciple of Kardec, she strove to remind both sceptics and converts of the core values on which spiritualism was based. In a lecture given to the Cercle Allan Kardec in 1909, she declared that “toute la morale spirite repose sur la charité et l'altruisme” (1909, p. 250). The movement, she argued, should discourage materialism, and remain committed to the pursuit of moral and intellectual progress. Moreover, she used her work to encourage women to embrace spiritualism rather than feminism. In an essay contained in her 1905 volume *Échos d'un autre monde* and entitled “La Femme moderne et sa mission”, Pillet-Will transcribed her supposed contact with the nineteenth-century ecclesiastic Monseigneur Félix Dupanloup in order to denounce feminism as “l'excès d'une amélioration tentée pour la femme mal payée, mal rétribuée, ayant peu de carrières qui lui soient ouvertes” (1905, p. 223). Women who perform the same work as men, she argued, risk losing their charm and softness of temperament. They are likely to neglect what Pillet-Will, through the spirit of Monseigneur Dupanloup, terms “la première de leurs attributions, à savoir: faire des hommes de leurs fils” (1905, p. 222). In asserting that women could embrace spiritualism without failing in their maternal or matrimonial duties, the Comtesse clearly did not conceive of spiritualist doctrine as a means of freeing herself or her fellow women from the obligations of the home.

However, while spiritualism provided Pillet-Will with a voice through which to express these ideas, her enthusiasm for spirit writing meant that she could not claim this voice as entirely her own. In his discussion of attitudes towards mediumship in France during this period, David Allen Harvey has argued that “female mediums were perceived as speaking not on their own account, but simply transmitting the messages given to them by the spirits, who remained the source of authority. Although many women may have been able to turn this position to their advantage, their authority, so to speak, depended upon their own effacement, on their denial of any agency in crafting the messages they communicated” (2005, p. 100-101). When viewed in relation to the work of Pillet-Will, Harvey's argument that female mediums suppressed their own voices nevertheless warrants further consideration. The reality is more complex, not least because the *Contes de l'au-delà* reveal how Pillet-Will both imitates the narrative styles of her spirit authors and uses their voices to articulate her own spiritualist beliefs.

Pillet-Will's attempts at recreating the authorial voices of dead writers such as Balzac and Flaubert appear unusual within the broader context of the French spiritualist movement, which at its outset had shown little interest in delivering spirit messages in the voice or narrative style of the deceased. During the Second Empire, Kardec had claimed that spirit communications presented in plain, simple language offered the best proof of authentic contact with the next world. “For Kardec”, explains Monroe, “simplicity and ordinariness were marks of intellectual perfection, and hence provided evidence of Spiritism's divine

<sup>5</sup> Janet writes, for example: “la faculté doit dépendre d'un état morbide particulier analogue à celui d'où peuvent sortir plus tard l'hystérie ou l'aliénation: la médiumnité est un symptôme et non pas une cause” (2005 [1889] p. 406).

<sup>6</sup> For a full account of Richet's involvement in the Villa Carmen Affair, see for example Brower, 2010, p. 84-92.

origins as concrete as any levitation or apparition” (2008, p. 111). However, not all spiritualists adhered to Kardec’s preferences in this regard. In some cases, mediums aimed for a high level of literary sophistication in the hope of proving that the messages they transmitted extended beyond their own intellectual capabilities. The language used in these spirit writings was nevertheless often so embellished that it appeared meaningless. In his 1857 volume *Les Manifestations des esprits*, Paul Auguez, for example, related a purported exchange with the spirit of Balzac, in which the deceased writer referenced the titles of several of his novels before ending with a stream of vague and unrelated observations about the natural world: “un soupir et tout ce qu’il peut dire pour faire taire et oublier un chant d’oiseau; un murmure léger dans le feuillage (ébats joyeux et cachés des sylphes heureux); un chant de pastourelle écouté et entendu en de poétiques lieux” (1857, p. 136).<sup>7</sup> The failure of such messages to replicate convincingly the narrative voices of their supposed spirit authors was a shortcoming of spiritualist practice that Kardec’s successor Denis sought to rectify. As prominent neurologists such as Janet continued to dismiss automatic writing as a product of the unconscious mind, Denis emphasised that some trance mediums were able to channel the voices of their spirit contacts, thus making these deceased figures appear as “des individualités autonomes, douées d’une grande intensité de vie, de sincérité, de réalité” (2005 [1911], p. 291). According to Denis, the distinctiveness of these voices presented compelling evidence of both the former earthly identities of the spirits themselves and the authenticity of the medium’s communication with them.

The *Contes de l’au-delà* appear as a literary extension of this trend for replicating the voices and personalities of the deceased. In the introduction to the volume, Pillet-Will and the anonymous medium who assisted her claimed to have transcribed their material exactly as it was related to them from the spirit world: “Nous avons, disent-elles, littéralement reproduit ce qui nous a été dit, rien de plus. Si ces communications que nous croyons fermement nous avoir été dictées par d’illustres écrivains, n’ajoutent que peu d’éclat à la gloire de ces hommes, notre amour-propre n’en souffrira aucunement” (1904, p. vi). Among these spirit voices, Balzac appeared a natural subject for this kind of literary ventriloquism. The author of *La Comédie humaine* had already been dead for seven years when Kardec founded the French spiritualist movement in 1857. However, during his lifetime Balzac had shown a persistent fascination with the occult sciences.<sup>8</sup> As numerous critics have observed, the novelist’s correspondence and literary production abound in references to magnetism, mesmerism, and somnambulism.<sup>9</sup> He was also an enthusiastic reader of the works of Emanuel Swedenborg, whose writings on the afterlife provided much of the theoretical basis for French spiritualist doctrine during the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Balzac had engaged directly in his published work with the question of life after death, most notably in *Ursule Mirouët* (1841), in which the fictional Doctor Minoret rises from the grave and appears to his niece Ursule in a series of somnambulant visions which enable her to claim her rightful inheritance. As Pillet-Will clearly recognised, Balzac’s interest in the paranormal ensured that his work was particularly well suited to adaptation through spirit writing.

In keeping with Denis’s emphasis on conveying the distinctiveness of individual spirit voices, the *Contes de l’au-delà* sought primarily to capture the key features of Balzac’s narrative style. The first of the stories in the collection to be attributed to Balzac, “Les Scrupules d’une âme en 1829”, opens with a description of Paris that renders the novelist’s authorial voice forcefully present. Reflecting on the diversity of the city and its inhabitants,

<sup>7</sup> On questions of style in spirit communications, with specific reference to this example from Auguez, see Monroe, 2008, p. 103.

<sup>8</sup> For an extended discussion of Balzac’s interest in the occult, see Baron, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Among the abundance of scholarly work to explore these topics in relation to Balzac, see for example Marcus, 1996, and Blix, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> On Balzac’s reading of Swedenborg, see for example Sjöden, 1963.

Pillet-Will observes that there are “les quartiers riches aux larges avenues aérées; les quartiers travailleurs où chaque étalage des boutiques, chaque aspect des monuments concordent et s’unissent pour rappeler à l’homme ses obligations d’étude” (1904, p. 39). In its repeated references to different kinds of neighbourhood within the capital, this passage aligns itself closely with Balzac’s celebrated description of Paris in *Ferragus* (1833), in which he observed that the streets of the city have their own distinctive characters and physiognomies: “des rues estimables, des rues toujours propres, des rues toujours sales, des rues ouvrières, travailleuses, mercantiles” (*CH*, V, p. 793). Moreover, in her allusion to the “quartiers infâmes” (1904, p. 39) that are hotbeds of vice and depravity, Pillet-Will reinvigorates the stereotype of Paris as a hellish inferno, a vision of the capital that Balzac by no means invented, but that the opening lines of *Ferragus* perpetuate through their reference to “certaines rues déshonorées autant que peut l’être un homme coupable d’infamie” (*CH*, V, p. 793). Finally, the Comtesse employs the formulation “une de ces” in order to segue into the main narrative, which begins on “une de ces belles matinées de juin où la clarté de l’atmosphère ne subit aucune altération” (1904, p. 40). The generalising phrases “un/e des” and “un/e de ces” appear as common, recognisable features of Balzac’s style that he used typically to encourage readers to identify with a particular type of person, place, or object, and their use in this passage is clearly intended to strengthen the impression that Balzac has dictated this material from beyond the grave. As this opening passage of “Les Scrupules d’une âme en 1829” illustrates, Pillet-Will offers a convincing imitation of Balzac’s literary style, and in so doing reflects the drive towards accuracy and authenticity which characterised the French spiritualist movement during the Belle Époque.

A closer reading of “Les Scrupules d’une âme en 1829” also reveals, however, that Pillet-Will was not content merely to ventriloquise Balzac. In this sequel to *Eugénie Grandet* (1833), she shows that she wanted her own authorial voice to be heard by using elements of Balzac’s earlier plot to create a new work. The story’s protagonist, Marthe, we are told, is a strange young woman who seems to have come from a different time. She bears no physical or emotional resemblance to her parents, and feels out of place in Paris, where she lives a frugal life. The narrative likens her bedroom to a “logis d’avare” (1904, p. 43), and describes her as having nightmares in which she sees herself sitting for hours at the window of a provincial house with only her needlework for company. Pillet-Will playfully elaborates this ghostly doubling of *Eugénie Grandet*, tantalising us with clues to Marthe’s previous identity, but confirming this with a direct address to the reader only in the final line of the text: “Et maintenant, dites-moi, ami lecteur, si, à ce portrait vieillot que je viens de vous tracer, vous n’avez pas reconnu Eugénie Grandet?” (1904, p. 47). However, there is more at stake here for Pillet-Will than constructing a humorous re-imagining of Balzac’s protagonist. As the fictional Marthe appears as a reincarnation of Eugénie, so the text emphasises that it is recreating its source material and presenting it in a different form. Unlike Eugénie, who becomes widowed, Marthe remains married to a man who tolerates her devotion to the Church. Ultimately, her dreams of having once lived in the provinces also cease to bother her. This confident willingness to remodel *Eugénie Grandet* illustrates that Pillet-Will was by no means a slavish imitator or mere conduit, but rather a dynamic adaptor who used Balzac’s authorial voice to nourish her own artistic undertakings.

While clearly a playful text, “Les Scrupules d’une âme en 1829” nevertheless incorporates an aggressive irony in its representation of Marthe’s marriage. When the young woman chooses to marry in the closing lines of the story, the narrative informs us that her decision is motivated by her desire to retain her independence: “Sans enthousiasme et sans répugnance trop grande, elle accepta, désireuse qu’elle était de se créer une vie en rapport avec ses goûts. Son mari eut le bon esprit de la laisser agir à sa guise” (1904, p. 46). In committing herself to marriage, Marthe is able both to continue living in the austere



conditions in which she feels most comfortable, and to devote herself freely to religion. At the most basic level, her insistence on a union in which she loses none of her autonomy recalls the actions of the eponymous heroine in *Eugénie Grandet*. In Balzac's novel, Eugénie consents to marry the Président de Bonfons only on the understanding that he agrees to a *mariage blanc* that threatens neither her virginity nor her freedom to live as she pleases. However, the fact that Marthe enjoys such freedom within her marriage, whereas Eugénie's husband dies, represents a crucial difference between the two stories, which in turn exposes Pillet-Will's sensitivity to the gender debates of her own time. As Rachel Mesch has shown in her study of women's magazines during the Belle Époque, the first decade of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence in France of a new gender discourse which encouraged women to actively pursue equality without neglecting their responsibilities to family and the home. The figure of the modern woman presented in magazines such as *Femina*, explains Mesch, "offered an inspiring image of 'having it all' in the Belle Époque — devoted husband, fulfilling family, beautiful home, and, if not a satisfying vocation, at least some sort of outlet for self-expression" (2013, p. 4). This anti-feminist but pro-gender equality discourse resonated clearly in the spiritualist movement, and in the writings of Pillet-Will. As the Countess argued in her spirit text "La Femme moderne et sa mission", to which I alluded earlier in this discussion, women could channel some of their energies towards their own interests and artistic pursuits without compromising their marital relationships or indeed embroiling themselves in feminist politics. "A côté des devoirs matrimoniaux, maternels ou simplement filiaux," she declared, "il y a des quantités de devoirs et de travaux qui s'offrent à leur initiative, et, s'il leur est interdit de laisser quelque chose de leurs aimables qualités dans les discussions oiseuses ou simplement cancanières des groupes féministes, il ne leur est pas défendu de consacrer à l'étude les quelques heures de liberté dont elles peuvent disposer" (1905, p. 224). The autonomy that the fictional Marthe claims within her own marriage can be viewed as an extension of this perspective, as the heroine succeeds in maintaining a relationship that does not require her to sacrifice her own interests. Moreover, her marital independence gestures towards the position of Pillet-Will herself, who combined her spiritualist activities with her roles as a wife and mother<sup>11</sup>, and who appeared similarly determined, in Mesch's terms, to "have it all".

In addition to the playfulness and irony of "Les Scrupules d'une âme en 1829", the *Contes de l'au-delà* reflect the way in which Pillet-Will adapted Balzac's authorial voice for the purpose of promoting spiritualist doctrine. The story "Marianne et Rose" presents a clear example of this tendency within the collection by emphasising the spiritualist values of charity, compassion for the poor, and the rejection of selfishness. On a sweltering hot summer's day, a beggar knocks at the home of the fictional Marianne, an irascible child who immediately slams the door in the old man's face. Moments later, the beggar visits Marianne's beautiful neighbour Rose, who offers him a jug of cider, a large helping of bread, and a chair on which to rest. Unmoved by the incident, Marianne remains bitter and selfish into adulthood, whereas Rose leads a charitable but promiscuous life, becoming a courtesan in Paris. The moral of the story only becomes apparent when the two characters are shown reaching the end of their lives. As Marianne and Rose enter the next world, an enlightened spirit offers them a choice between death and returning to Earth to atone for their faults. The terrified pair quickly decide on reincarnation, and promise to devote themselves to hard work, unmotivated by personal enmity or financial gain. "Renaissions ensemble", Rose urges Marianne, "et expions par une vie de bonté jointe à une vie de travail, moi, ma frivolité coupable, toi, ta sécheresse trop grande" (1904, p. 271). This positive endorsement of charitable behaviour

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<sup>11</sup> Pillet-Will's husband was Frédéric Pillet-Will, whom she married in 1869, and who became Regent of the Bank of France in 1871.

draws very obviously on the thought of Kardec, who considered charity one of the core principles of the spiritualist movement. “Selfishness, in turn”, observes Monroe, “was any act that put personal comfort and gratification before the greater good of society” (2008, p. 106). The manner in which “Mariette et Rose” engages with Balzac’s authorial voice is nevertheless more difficult to elaborate. On first reading, Pillet-Will’s overt promotion of spiritualist morality appears at odds with Balzac’s often enthusiastic representation of nineteenth-century French society as rife with individualism and monetary greed. At the same time, however, the medium reveals her ability to adapt different voices within Balzac’s creative personality, not least his own interest in charity as a key driver of social progress. As Vincent Bierce (2018) has argued, *La Comédie humaine* reflects extensively on the themes of charity and philanthropy, most notably in *Le Médecin de campagne* (1833) and *Le Curé de village* (1841), in which Balzac combines traditional notions of Christian charity with utopian thought to depict the regeneration of two impoverished rural communities.<sup>12</sup> In “Mariette et Rose”, Pillet-Will can be seen to resuscitate this aspect of the novelist’s social consciousness, blending it with her own spiritualist agenda to the point where the boundary between her authorial voice and Balzac’s breaks down, and it becomes impossible for the reader to distinguish between them. In so doing, her work exposes a fundamental aspect of the way in which adaptation operates. Like spirit writing, adaptation is a polyphonic activity that brings together the different voices of adaptor, author, and source material to create a new work. By aligning Balzac’s earlier interest in charity with spiritualist doctrine, “Mariette et Rose” shows how these voices can intermingle and ultimately coalesce, resulting in a text that — in Barthesian terms — is never fully the work of a single author.

Pillet-Will’s ability to reflect on her work as a writer-medium, and on the nature of spirit writing as an artistic practice, is further illustrated by “La Possédée”, the longest of the stories in the *Contes de l’au-delà* that she ascribes to Balzac. Set in the small town of Brive, the plot of “La Possédée” revolves around the fictional Thérèse de Cernay, a young woman who devotes herself to religion with obsessive zeal. Already concerned by their daughter’s extreme religiosity, Thérèse’s parents become even more alarmed when she begins to suffer seizures in which she channels the voice of a male spirit who forbids her from marrying and having children. “Son âme, trop exaltée par l’éducation religieuse”, the voice warns, “n’est pas faite pour donner asile à des êtres qui viennent chercher sur terre le progrès et non le mysticisme outré voisin de la démence” (1904, p. 127). The seizures cause Monsieur and Madame de Cernay to fear that Thérèse has gone mad, prompting in turn the collapse of her engagement to the son of a family friend. Given its emphasis on the theme of spirit possession, “La Possédée” can easily be read as a reflection of — and a response to — the longstanding association of spiritualism with madness.<sup>13</sup> During the first decade of the twentieth century, the notion of the medium as a madwoman was still a recurring tenet of French medical discourse, as evidenced in particular by the work of physician Paul Duhem. In 1904, the same year as the *Contes de l’au-delà* appeared in print, Duhem published his *Contribution à l’étude de la folie chez les spirites*, in which he argued that “les spirites [...] sont des malades”. “Quelques-uns sont devenus tels”, Duhem concluded, “parce qu’ils se sont livrés à des pratiques spirites. D’autres, portant déjà en eux le sceau de la débilité ou de la dégénérescence mentale, c’est-à-dire étant déjà malades, n’ont trouvé dans le spiritisme qu’un simple aliment à leur délire” (1904, p. 99). In her representation of Thérèse’s seizures, Pillet-Will can be seen to counter such hypotheses by showing how the anonymous spirit voice articulates carefully reasoned arguments that are consistent with Kardecist thought. As this otherworldly voice explains, Thérèse’s all-consuming love of Christianity amounts to self-gratification, a trait that makes her an unsuitable vehicle for reincarnated souls who are

<sup>12</sup> For further background on Balzac and utopian thought, see for example Vanoncini, 1988.

<sup>13</sup> For further discussion of spiritualism and madness, see for example Le Maléfan, 1999.

returning to Earth on the next stage of their journey towards spiritual perfection. According to spiritualist doctrine, to allow such a woman to bear children would be to obstruct this process of spiritual development, and this — as the narrative states unambiguously — would be a crime.

On a deeper textual level, however, “La Possédée” can also be interpreted as a reflection on the adaptive process, and on the artistic relationship between Pillet-Will and the dead authors whose voices she attempts to recreate. In particular, the story resonates clearly with Harold Bloom’s concept of the anxiety of influence. Our artistic precursors “flood us”, writes Bloom, “and our imagination can die by drowning in them, but no imaginative life is possible if such inundation is wholly evaded” (1973, p. 154). “La Possédée” appears as a compelling metaphor for this dichotomy, and for the way in which adaptors are both haunted and inspired by the artistic voices of the past. For Thérèse, the sudden outbursts of the spirit that takes possession of her can neither be predicted nor controlled. Equally, the menacing voice spreads fear in both the de Cernay household and the local community, not least when a seizure grips Thérèse in church and the spirit offers its own opinion on the Bible reading that the congregation has just heard. These moments of fear and involuntary possession gesture towards the anxiety that Pillet-Will appears to suffer in relation to her canonical forebears. The preface to the *Contes de l’au-delà* reflects in particular the supremely anxious nature of spirit writing, as the medium — no doubt mindful that some readers would dispute the authenticity of her work — vents her concern that her spirit authors will overwhelm her physical and intellectual abilities and she will be unable to replicate perfectly their narrative styles. Producing a spirit text, she explains, under the guise of the spirit of Théophile Gautier, is like trying to write a novel in the midst of a tumultuous debate in the Chambre des Députés: “un mouvement trop brusque, une saute de température, un éclat de voix détruit parfois tout ce que nous [les esprits] avons eu tant de peine à former” (1904, p. xii). However, if “La Possédée” metaphorises the haunted nature of spirit writing, the text ultimately confronts such anxieties through its representation of the gift that Thérèse acquires in exchange for her family’s willingness to break off her engagement. In the conclusion to the narrative, the spirit voice ceases its disturbing interventions, leaving its former host with the ability to heal the sick and disabled. “Thérèse, complètement guérie”, the text summarises, “accomplissait de véritables miracles. On venait la trouver de partout” (1904, p. 133). The eponymous heroine’s earlier experience of haunting gives way to the productive enterprise of sharing her gift and improving the lives of others. In so doing, Thérèse echoes the figure of Pillet-Will herself, who uses the voices of the dead as a basis for her own creative endeavours, and for her self-appointed mission of improving society through spiritualist practice.

In enabling us to contemplate the parallels between adaptation and mediumship, “La Possédée” renders it all the more surprising that Pillet-Will’s work has been largely neglected by academic scholarship. As one of the most prolific spirit writers to emerge during the Belle Époque, Pillet-Will embraced the spiritualist movement as a means of disseminating her belief in Kardecist doctrine and — albeit problematically — of making her own artistic voice heard. Like her contemporaries Lucie Grange and Marie-Antoinette Bosc, she seized upon the growing feminisation of French spiritualism under Léon Denis to penetrate a literary marketplace that during this period remained largely closed to women. Under the influence of Denis, spiritualist practice had also begun to show greater enthusiasm for replicating the distinctive voices of the dead, a trend of which the *Contes de l’au-delà* stand as an obvious manifestation. Balzac’s own interest in the occult sciences made him an ideal subject for this exercise in pastiche. However, as I have shown in my analysis of the stories that are attributed to the spirit of Balzac in this collection, Pillet-Will was by no means simply a literary ventriloquist. In “Les Scrupules d’une âme en 1829”, she uses Balzac’s narrative

style as the catalyst for a playful improvisation based on *Eugénie Grandet*, in which she makes clear her willingness to depart from her source material and ironises over the autonomy that women can achieve within marriage. Equally, in “Mariette et Rose”, she exposes her ability to draw out different voices from within Balzac’s own inherently polyphonic fiction, focusing in particular on the novelist’s earlier interest in charity as a counterweight to the selfish materialism of nineteenth-century society. Finally, her work highlights the key parallels between mediumship and adaptation, both activities which derive their artistic vibrancy from a Barthesian interplay of voices, and which simultaneously can induce a Bloomian anxiety of influence. In so doing, the *Contes de l’au-delà* reflect the enduring authority — and adaptability — of Balzac’s authorial voice, even as it purportedly speaks to us from the beyond.

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